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Mormon beliefs about land and natural resources, 1847–1877

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This paper examines normative Mormon beliefs about land and resources during their first three decades in Utah. It focuses on the implications of their religious teachings for their landscape attitudes, allocation practices, and management, and discusses probable origins of these views. Identification with the ancient Israelites prompted much biblical imagery in Mormon views of the land. They also adopted from the Bible the idea that the landscape was a vehicle through which God rewarded or punished human behavior. They believed that their task was to improve raw wilderness in order to return the earth to an Edenic state. They attempted this restoration through cooperative economic activities and planned settlement programs. The Mormon pioneers believed that land ownership was divine, but that humans could hold stewardships over personal property and natural resources. They were expected to use their resources, but not to waste them. The biblically inspired beliefs adopted by the Mormons actually produced a frontier conservation ethic in early Utah. Similarities of some Mormon attitudes towards resources with those of New England Puritans are apparent, although Mormon beliefs were also creative and syncretistic. Mormon conservation principles, however, did not prevent harmful land-use practices by pioneers settling an unfamiliar and fragile environment.

Within the theme of the expansion of European culture overseas, Christianity and its impact on real and imagined landscapes must be one of the most important transfers.[1] Before our modern secular era, the Christian Bible provided many European immigrants to the United States and their descendants with an archetype for land-use relationships. Various groups of American religious dissidents of European extraction have further used biblical images to plan ideal landscapes and to regulate use of natural resources.[2]

One such example of a European–American religious community is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, during their early settlement of Utah under Brigham Young's leadership (1847–1877). Although the Mormon Church is often defined as an indigenous American religion, it exhibited two important European connections. First, the Mormon vision of Utah as a nascent scriptural landscape reflected a European Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. Also, Utah's population in 1870 comprised 35.4% foreign born, mostly northern Europeans, when the contemporaneous national figure was 14.4%.[3] Much of the character of Mormon settlement in the Great Basin, specifically of architecture and economic activities, resulted from the contributions of European converts.

The Mormons, during their first thirty years in Utah, are not only an example of the transfer of European landscape visions and population to North America. They also illustrate the ways in which new religious denominations shape, select, and combine beliefs in settling new environments.

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This paper examines normative Mormon beliefs about land and resources during their first three decades in Utah. It focuses on the implications of their religious teachings for their landscape attitudes, allocation practices, and management; and it discusses probable origins of these views. A number of the views identified are currently accepted by Latter-day Saints, but the restriction of the study period to 1847–1877 permits a focus on the time when Utah's Mormons most strongly developed their own institutions, with little federal influence. The Latter-day Saints' religion is a complex and syncretistic system beliefs. Because it does not itself appear to derive from a single conceptual model, several different themes will be addressed in this paper to examine early Mormon beliefs about land and resources.

Although normative beliefs, the principal data source for this study, are not necessarily identical with popular views, there are compelling reasons to examine them. Aside from the greater ease of examining source materials on doctrine rather than public opinion, the Mormon Church itself had a highly authoritarian influence on Mormon thought. Joseph Smith and his successor Brigham Young, as leaders of the Mormon Church, were acknowledged by faithful Mormons as the ultimate authorities for Mormon beliefs.[4] Although other Church officials could and did expound on theological issues, their views were circumscribed by their belief in the divine right of the prophet presidents. Individual religious experiences were central to the Mormon faith, but their acceptance required conformity within the framework of certain established doctrines. Individuals or splinter groups who did not comply faced ultimate expulsion from the Church. Normative beliefs consequently carried considerable weight, although the repetition with which Church leaders scolded members about particular themes indicates actual variation in belief and practice. The Church also developed a strong hierarchical governing body, with various leadership positions relating to the sacred and secular needs of the Mormon people. The typically benevolent, paternalistic role of Church leaders fostered acceptance of normative, uniform values among the Mormons.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began under the leadership of its prophet Joseph Smith in upstate New York during the 1820s and 1830s. The new church differed from contemporary Protestant denominations of the United States in several important ways. It avowed that prophecy and the original Christian church were restored through Joseph Smith. He transcribed new scriptural histories and codes of conduct in the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*. These works did not replace the Christian Bible, which remained central to the Mormon faith, but were accepted as additional, compatible texts.

Although Smith's revelations about polygamy most offended other Americans, the Mormons' political cohesiveness and obedience to Church leaders raised additional anti-Mormon sentiment on the Midwestern frontiers where they settled. Joseph Smith proclaimed Jackson County, Missouri, as the center of the Mormon Zion.[5] His murder by anti-Mormon frontiersmen and government hostility, however, caused the Mormons under Brigham Young to migrate to Utah in 1847. Utah was then far removed from the American ecumene, and the Latter-day Saints viewed the Great Basin region as their haven from persecution.

America as Zion

From its inception, the young church viewed itself as the reestablished Christian community of New Testament Palestine. Fundamentalists in acceptance of the Bible, Latter-day Saints acknowledged that God had designated the Jews as the holy, chosen people who produced the messiah. The Mormons further accepted the Pauline belief that the Jews forfeited their special status by rejecting Jesus, and that the role of the holy people consequently transferred to the Christians.[6] In the Mormon view, Christians during the next eighteen centuries, both Catholic and Protestant, failed through unrighteous behavior to merit their chosen status. It was the turn of the Latter-day Saints, therefore, to inherit the title of ancient Israel, specifically of the tribe of Joseph, in order to complete the Bible's millennial prophecies regarding the return of the messiah and God's Kingdom on earth.[7]

The Mormons, like other Christian sects before them, adopted much of the Pentateuch's symbolism regarding their identity and their landscape. They called themselves Israel; their land, Zion. Among their leaders were prophets and patriarchs. Non-Mormons were called gentiles; and their land, Babylon.[8] As with earlier European religious dissenters and American Puritans, the Mormon's identification of themselves as Israel invited frequent use of the imagery of *Exodus*, in which the faithful must escape oppression, journey into the wilderness, and cause the desert to bloom like the rose.

Zion is one of the most frequent landscape images in the message of Church leaders, but it was a concept with changing definitions.[9] The Mormons basically adopted the biblical prediction that Zion would be the location of the second coming and the onset of the millennium. They delimited Zion, in its broadest futuristic extent, as coextensive with North and South America. Following the Latter-day Saints' expulsion from Missouri, however, they typically defined Zion as the location of Mormon settlement. In this context, the Mormons as Israel, rather than a specific location, gave Zion its definition.

Prophecies cited in the Books of *Isaiah*, *Daniel*, and *Revelations*, subsequently proved to the Mormons' satisfaction that Utah was indeed the place where the millennium would begin. Apostle Orson Pratt explained:[10]

> . . . what the Scriptures have portrayed in regard to the meaning of Zion, is a people who shall receive the law of God, and who shall be acknowledged of the Lord as his people—a people who shall be gathered together from the nations of the earth, and build a house to the name of the Lord in the latter-days. A people who shall have their abiding place in the mountains, and who shall build a city that shall be called Zion. All these things are clearly portrayed in Prophecy.

Citing the second and fortieth chapters of *Isaiah*, Pratt argued that Utah's mountainous terrain and the immigration of Mormon converts from many lands together in Utah demonstrated that Utah was their interim Zion.

The Latter-day Saints' belief in themselves as the chosen people of ancient Israel generated several theological corollaries concerning land and resources. Mormons strongly subscribed to the Old Testament concept that the landscape was a vehicle through which God rewarded or punished human behavior.[11] Mormons accepted that one of God's principal means of rewarding the faithful was through gifts of land for their use. They also assumed that God's covenant relationship to His people manifested itself through the physical environment.

In *Deuteronomy* (ch. 11), God presents the Israelites with a blessing and a curse: obedience to the commandments will induce abundant precipitation, crop

yields, and pasturage; rejection of the commandments will cause drought and diaspora. Similarly, Mormon leaders of the mid-nineteenth century admonished their people to behave righteously to ensure good harvests or adequate water supplies. Correct behavior applied not only to relevant agricultural practices, but also to seemingly unrelated areas of life. For example, Apostle John Taylor cautioned his brethren in 1865:[12]

> We can remember the time when we could not raise peaches to eat, and it was a doubt whether an apple tree would grow or not. Now go and look at your orchards; there is not a better peach growing country in the world than this. How is this? God has blessed the elements for our sakes, and also the earth; but let the Saints leave this place, and it would return again to the wilderness condition; the wicked could not live here ... He blesses the land for our sakes.

Thus Brigham Young warned the settlers of northern Utah in 1873:[13]

> But with regard to Tithing, this people will be cursed unless they stop their nonsense, unless they cease running after the fashions and folly of Babylon, and put as Tithing that means which is uselessly spent. How long would it take the Lord to cause the waters of every stream that runs into this valley to sink down into the earth, and to make the valley as dry as the Holy Land is today. It would take him but a very short time. He could ... cause the water of every stream in this valley to sink deep into the bowels of the earth ... and the clouds would gather no more moisture, and no more rain would fall on the earth. Where would be your trees then? What would become of your gardens? What would become of the forage on the mountains that our cattle and sheep feed upon? It would be dried up, become dust, and be blown into some other country, and the rocks would be left bare, as they are in some of the eastern lands.

Mormon leaders contrasted the contemporary aridity of Judea with its productive biblical image to show that the land desertified when the Israelites broke their covenant.[14] Poor harvests and droughts in the Great Basin, however, were not always explained as ethically dependent. As in *Deuteronomy* (ch. 8), problems such as drought or insect infestations sometimes were explained as trials.[15] God sent these to test the faithful, or as a foil against which God could demonstrate His power and ultimate protection of His people.

Mormons to build the Kingdom of God on earth

Mormons perceived the mutual improvement of man and nature as more than insurance for good harvests. They also saw this dual perfectability as the means for creating the "peaceable kingdom" of the latter days. Brigham Young reasoned:[16]

> Let the people be holy, and the earth under their feet will be holy. Let the people be holy, and filled with the Spirit of God, and every animal and creeping thing will be filled with peace; the soil of the earth will bring forth in its strength, and the fruits thereof will be meat for man. The more purity that exists, the less the strife; the more kind we are to our animals, the more will peace increase, and the savage nature of the brute creation vanish away.

The early Latter-day Saints in fact conceived of their role within the landscape as central to their religion. In addition to the universal religious concerns for personal salvation, Brigham Young indicated that the development and improvement of land, to "make it as the Garden of Eden", was a central purpose of life.[17] Moreover, the Mormon role in the landscape was to be an active one, requiring real spiritual and physical effort on their part to prepare the earth for the millennium.[18]

Although Mormons believed that God blessed the land in proportion to their

righteous behavior, they did not hold that the earth was by nature perfect. The earth had a destiny to be realized in the millennium, and they interpreted its ability to produce vegetation as evidence that it also had a soul.[19] The earth had been cursed since the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. God told Adam, "cursed is the ground for thy sake", and spread thorns and thistles (*Genesis* 3:17–18). In the millennium, however, Mormons believed that the earth would be perfected as a human abode. A Mormon article of faith, in fact, states that, "the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory."[20] In developing the land and extracting resources, the Mormons believed that they were doing more than merely establishing a means of subsistence. As Latter-day Saints, they were literally redeeming the earth from its curse, preparing Zion for the return of Jesus, and building the Kingdom of God on earth.[21]

Building the Kingdom had two components. Mormons were to build the Kingdom within, to make themselves a holy people through correct beliefs and actions. They were also to build the Kingdom without, to construct Mormon temples fit for the Lord's habitation and to dedicate their land to God and Church. Mormon theology did not separate these material and spiritual components, and it recognized no distinction between sacred and profane within the Mormon sphere.[22] Babylon of the gentiles might be profaned, but all activities pertaining to the Saints were held as sacred or potentially so. Brigham Young stated in 1851:[23]

> When the Saints in Zion are sowing and reaping, and building according to counsel, they are causing the light to shine, as emphatically as though they were abroad in foreign nations, preaching and baptizing for remission of sins. All things needful to be done, are but parts of the great whole, which must be accomplished before men will be prepared to be restored back again into the presence of the Father. . . .

The task of transforming the nineteenth-century Great Basin into a land of milk and honey, however, was truly formidable. Today, only 3% of Utah's land is considered arable. A harsh environment threatened the prospects of providing the population with even bare necessities. If transforming the earth into paradise required spiritual purity and active labor of the Mormons, Church leaders realized that it would also require much cooperation and planning. Given Utah's climatic and topographic constraints to mere survival, the Church did not leave to chance or individual initiative the prospects for persistence and success. Rather, it drew upon its heritage of Christian communitarianism and its strong hierarchy to implement its land-use objectives.

Building the Kingdom of God was from the outset a cooperative venture.[24] A holy people as a body was needed to restore the earth to its Edenic state. Joseph Smith reiterated, "if ye are not one, ye are not mine." Unity, cooperation, and communal property were supposed to have characterized the earliest Christian communities of the Mediterranean region. The young church was typically poor in cash but rich in goals awaiting actualization. In addition to the considerable problem of supporting the Saints as agriculturalists within the Great Basin, Church leaders also planned the construction of impressive temples for ritual observances, and financed the emigration of thousands of destitute converts from northern Europe. Voluntary, cooperative labor was the most economical way to implement these works. Church buildings and even factories were built through cooperative unpaid labor. In addition, neighbors cooperated on the village level to maintain and administer community irrigation systems. The labor and construction costs of individual fencing for livestock were prohibitive

in timber-poor Utah, and grazing and fence building developed around a communal system of community grazing lands. Church leaders constantly stressed unity and cooperation as spiritual and practical values.

Private enterprise as a means of resource development was never actually discouraged in early Utah, however. The failures of some of their early communal economic ventures, and the perceived need to maintain capitalists' incentives to develop needed resources argued against taking the cooperative ideal too far.[25] Wealthy individuals had a larger share to tithe to the Church, could employ the poor, and devote needed capital to resource development. Brigham Young recognized that some men would inevitably prosper more than others.[26] Economic historians debate the degree of community cooperation and the level of church control over economic initiatives compared with other Western settlement experiences. Cooperation still emerges as an important characteristic of early Mormon activity.

Brigham Young, with his strong centralized authority, also promoted planned settlement within the Great Basin.[27] His colonization program required potential settlement sites to be located about ten miles apart and to be scouted in advance of occupance, in order to ascertain agricultural productivity and proximity to needed resources. Mormons were to settle in agricultural villages surveyed before settlement. Settlers for new communities were to be selected according to their mix of experience and skills. Mormons were "called" to build new towns, just as they were called to become missionaries or spiritual leaders.

Despite the amount of material published on Mormon town planning and colonization programs, the specific attributes and design of the Kingdom were not well articulated in contemporary sources. Although the distinctive, gridiron agricultural village is widely believed to be based on Joseph Smith's City of Zion plan; Jackson and Layton found little explicit mention of its use by Mormon pioneers beyond Salt Lake City.[28] Despite their remarkable similarities and visual impact, the villages' prosperity was apparently the hallmark of the Kingdom in Mormon eyes, rather than a specific landscape pattern. The villages, where discussed in the early writings, apparently took their compact form from practical community concerns, such as access to education, defense, and cooperative irrigation projects; while repetition of the design reflected the force of habit.[29] In actuality, surveys did not always precede settlement, and many towns' early residents simply followed friends or relatives, without the benefit of a "call".

To Utah's Mormons, the Kingdom evidently was to consist of thriving and beautiful towns and cities, each with permanent and substantial homes, fruit trees, and ornamental landscaping.[30] The Salt Lake City temple, like the Middle Western temples that preceded it and the Utah temples which followed, was to provide a divine abode. Agricultural lands were to be productive and well watered. The Mormon concept of the environment of Zion in fact hallowed the American self-sufficient agricultural ideal. Mining for basic minerals like coal and iron was encouraged, but repeatedly was discouraged for precious metals. Fearing the lure of the California gold fields, Brigham Young stated that the millennial Zion would contain abundant gold, but that the Saint who abandoned farming for prospecting typically impoverished himself.[31] In contrast, Mormon development of irrigation was interpreted almost as divine revelation. Mormon leaders generously praised evidence of good harvests and beautification of the landscape.

Mormon ownership of land and resources: "The earth is the Lord's"

In many of its environmental beliefs, the Mormon Church looked to the Bible for guidance, yet interpreted themes in ways which mainstream Christians or ancient Israelites had not attempted. For example, *Psalm 24* had long informed readers that, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Before establishment of the General Land Survey in Salt Lake City in 1869, however, Utah Mormons interpreted that statement literally to prevent outright private ownership of land and resources among themselves.[32] Mormons, when in the Middle West, bought and sold land in accordance with United States laws, but established their ideal mode of land tenure upon moving to Utah.[33] In Mormon thinking, God had provided the land for human use, but land ownership was permanently divine. Individuals and communities could obtain clearly recognized, exclusive rights to land and resources, and these rights could be bequeathed or sold, but there was no ownership in fee simple.

Before 1869, the land allocation system essentially worked by consensus.[34] Typically, the adult males who established new settlements received by lottery pre-surveyed field and house parcels. Claimants paid small fees to register their land, but not for the land itself. The acreage of the individual land claims was determined by need, usually defined as family size.[35] From 1847–1849, land surveys, conveyances, and disputes were handled by ecclesiastical authorities and courts. From 1850 to 1869, surveyors responsible to Utah Territory and county recorders maintained the Mormon land tenure system. After 1869, the United States General Land Office administered land claims according to the provisions of the Preemption and Homesteads Acts.

Natural resources occupying lands not desired for their own value were managed similarly. Individuals or communities petitioned the legislature or courts for rights to surface water, grazing land, or timber. In exchange, they typically paid a small fee, and promised to manage the resources for the benefit of the community.[36] Resource grants included rights of use and extraction, but no ownership of the land which the resources occupied.

In a system where God owned the land and resources but people held rights to them, Mormons believed that the appropriate human relationship to the land was stewardship.[37] A steward was defined as one entrusted with management of another's property and accountable to the owner. Adult Mormons received stewardships over their farms, improvements, personal effects, and even occupations.

Stewardships were variously administered in different times and places during the early Church's history. At times, Church members were required to sign over their entire assets to their presiding bishop, or local Church authority. The bishop might in turn redistribute property more equally among the rich and poor, according to their needs. Joseph Smith preached that men who were not equal in earthly things would not be equal in heavenly things.[38] Sometimes Mormons were required only to turn over their "residue", or surplus. When these measures failed to achieve the desired equality or Church revenues, the biblical law of tithing a tenth of one's income was enforced.[39] Tithes typically were paid in farm products, home manufactures, or labor in cash-poor Utah. Church leaders explained that because the earth is the Lord's, humans were obligated to return to Him through the Church at least 10% of what was rightfully His. In tithing, Mormons acknowledged their belief in God's ownership of land and its products.

Several principles governed the allocation and retention of stewardships. Stewards were expected to develop their lands and resources. Mormons maintained a strict "use it or lose it" philosophy. Rights to farmland, irrigation water, or timber could be rescinded and granted to those who would develop the resources.[40] Nor were stewards to squander their allotments.[41] For many years, the Latter-day Saints viewed hunger through crop failures or hardships through lack of necessary fuel and shelter as experienced possibilities. Mormon leaders consequently encouraged economy, thrift, and food storage to mitigate the effects of bad harvests. Brigham Young stated repeatedly that God gave Mormons literally all the resources necessary for sustenance in Utah, but that people must develop and husband the resources in order to survive.[42]

The Church's economic policies also stressed self-sufficiency and avoidance of expensive imports of items that were not locally produced. The Church argued that resources which appeared to be locally insufficient could be made adequate through alternative technologies, in addition to thrift and careful management.[43] For example, where timber was in short supply, the settlers built houses of adobe bricks, and saved timber for flooring and necessary supports. Accordingly, the President counselled in 1856:[44]

> Wisdom in temporal as well as spiritual matters should invariable mark the course of saints; they are entitled to the blessings flowing from peopling these desert wilds, and it would seem high time for all to understand and rightly practice their use and distribution.

A frontier land ethic

Several historians of American use and abuse of nature have criticized the American pioneer for his lack of environmental awareness and his failure to conserve land and resources.[45] The *Genesis* dictate to "be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it", has been interpreted as the frontiersman's licence to decimate the environment. In a similar vein, other historians have blamed the western "Judeo-Christian tradition" for environmental deterioration.[46] Yet the Jewish and Christian beliefs adopted and modified by the Mormons regarding the earth actually produced an environmental conservation ethic in frontier Utah. By viewing themselves as tenants obligated to a divine landlord, Mormons coupled an essentially optimistic attitude towards nature with the concept of stewardship as a theological basis for resource conservation.[47]

The Mormon example, therefore, argues against applying a single interpretation of highly complex, syncretistic religious texts like the Bible to various groups of adherents. There is no single environmental message in the Jewish and Christian Bibles, nor is there a single way in which denominations interpret a given text to formulate their relationship to nature. The Mormon faith was, as are all scripturally based religions, highly selective of the precepts it emphasized in daily life and of the interpretations it placed on them. For example, the Latter-day Saints believed the *Genesis* story of the earth's post-Edenic curse, but they ignored a widespread Christian disdain for the earth as a painful, temptation-ridden antechamber to eternal afterlife. Their descriptions of nature, rather, resemble the favorable descriptions of mountains and agricultural lands found in the Prophets and Psalms.[48] Mormons believed the earth was for humanity to use and enjoy. Worldly things did not inherently lead one astray, provided attachment to personal wealth was controlled. Church leaders

regarded beautiful scenery and productive, well tended farms as signs of God's favor.

Latter-day Saints further combined beliefs about nature from a variety of inspirational sources. For example, they emphasized the ancient Israelites' concept of the dual perfectability of man and nature, in which amelioration of the land reflected spiritual improvement of the people. This interpretation of environmental change is also part of Joseph Smith's cosmology, in which only ideal truths are permanent. All else exists in a constant state of change, that will either take the direction of improvement, increase and growth, or else of decline and diminution. The landscape or individual that is not in a state of improvement will automatically be in a state of degeneration. In the words of Brigham Young's counsellor Heber C. Kimball:[49]

> If this people do right, you will live for ever and prosper and aggrandize these valleys. Well, now, will you stop increasing? When you stop increasing, that is the end of you, when you stop improving, that is the end of your improvements.... Those that will live the religion of Christ will have orchards.

One might also extract from this tenet the general American faith in economic development and progress.

The Mormon conservation ethic was clearly ethnocentric, devoted to resource development and an Edenic, agrarian ideal, rather than to wilderness preservation, but it also opposed the reckless squandering of nature. The comparatively limited, harsh setting of Utah perhaps convinced Church leaders that they inhabited a finite environment. In any case, they often urged the Latter-day Saints not to take from the earth more than they needed, and criticized environmental deterioration as thwarting the improvement of Zion. Apostle Orson Hyde instructed in 1865:[50]

> I have labored most industriously since I have acquired a little experience myself, to induce my brethren to direct their energies upon smaller tracts of land.... When men have confined themselves to ten acres of land, having plowed it well the season before, all the foul weeds killed out and the soil left clean, the seed sown at an early day in the Spring, and put [it] in good order, I have known such fields to produce from forty to sixty bushels of good plump wheat to the acre. Besides, when fields are so cultivated, less water is used....

Conservation legislation which the Utah Mormons enacted against indiscriminate grazing and careless waste of timberlands also argue for Mormon conservation principles.[51]

Nor did Church leaders adopt the supposedly widespread frontier attitude that resource exhaustion in one locale was permissible because new lands were available for future occupance. Church leaders were foreigners to the frontier mentality of "get rich and get out" and wholesale abandonment of depleted areas because they perceived nowhere else to settle. Only in the desert West, they believed, would Mormons avoid persecution and find their own place in which to nurture their society of Saints. At times they actually praised the barrenness and isolation of Utah, for they believed that the land's intrinsic undesirability would keep "outsiders" away from Utah.[52] At the same time, Mormons realized the environmental limitations of Utah, where most of the land was too dry, rocky, saline, or steep to be farmed. Consequently, they understood that they would have to manage what they had, and Church leaders encouraged resource conservation.[53]

Certainly the rank and file Mormons perceived much of their landscape as harsh and undesirable, especially in the Colorado Plateau region of eastern and

southern Utah. Their disinterest in the scenic splendors of current National Parks was apparently colored by the severe hardships which settlers faced in trying to traverse or farm these areas.[54] Within the official position of the Church, unfavorable attitudes towards the environment would be classified as individual complaints, rather than as sanctioned beliefs.

Unfortunately, as the following comments of Orson Hyde indicate, normative conservation principles did not prevent harmful land-use practices by pioneers settling an unfamiliar and fragile environment:[55]

> I find the longer we live in these valleys that the range is becoming more and more destitute of grass; the grass is not only eaten up by the great amount of stock that feed on it, but they tramp it out by the very roots, and where grass once grew luxuriantly, there is now nothing but the desert weed, and hardly a spear of grass is to be seen.
>
> Between here and the mouth of Emigration Canyon, when our brethren, the Pioneers first landed here in '47, there was an abundance of grass all over these benches; they were covered with it like a meadow. There is now [1865] nothing but the desert weed, the sage, the rabbit-brush and such like plants, that make very poor feed for stock. Being cut short of our range in the way we have been and accumulating stock as we are, we have nothing to feed them with in the winter and they perish. There is no profit in this, neither is it pleasing in the sight of God our Heavenly Father that we should continue a course of life like unto this.... I do say, that a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things that he possesses, nor upon the vast amount he extends his jurisdiction over, but it consists in a little well cared for, and everything in order.

John Wesley Powell and his associates also noted erosion, over-grazing, and abandonment of over-irrigated, under-fertilized fields in Utah by the 1870s.[56]

Yi Fu Tuan has argued that protective attitudes toward the environment do not automatically ensure environmental protection.[57] The Mormons did espouse a set of environmentally sound attitudes; paradoxically based on the same Judeo-Christian belief system that some historians have criticized as the root of western society's environmental crisis. Mormons at mid-nineteenth century, however, along with other American settlers, appear to have had little notion of the land's carrying capacity for various resource-intensive activities. Comprehensive conservation techniques were not generally known or practised elsewhere in the United States from 1847–1877. Also, eastern Americans and northern Europeans had virtually no prior experience with the low capabilities and regenerative powers of desert and semi-arid mountain lands. Emigrating from the most forgiving of biomes, the temperate deciduous forest and its margins, these settlers moved to some of the least forgiving in the Great Basin. Continuing high rates of immigration and natural increase created demands on local environments for fuel, forage, food, and shelter which even highly productive forests and rangelands could not have long sustained. Particularly before completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the area from which Mormons could extract resources was circumscribed by transportation limitations, and local ecosystems were therefore heavily exploited.

Diffusion or revelation?

At this point, identification and explanation of the historical roots of Mormon environmental beliefs seem warranted.

Several alternative explanatory frameworks are apparent, based on the differences between a culture's own beliefs about itself, and the cultural filters through which even the most objective research by "outsiders" is conducted.[58]

The nineteenth-century (and current popular) Mormon interpretation of their environmental beliefs would be divine revelation, whether through the Bible or the revelations transcribed by Joseph Smith and his successors. This "insider" view would explain any similarity between the beliefs of Mormons and earlier denominations in terms of a shared Bible and the historical consistency of divinely revealed truths.

A modified position currently taken by many Mormon scholars also assumes the divine origin of the Mormon Church and its teachings. It affirms, however, that Joseph Smith did not live in cultural isolation from the religious beliefs of his day, and that a search for the Church's intellectual roots is a viable scholarly topic. Yet this second position tempers the emphasis on simple diffusion of ideas with the Mormon belief in the historical uniformity of revelations; and interprets intellectual antecedents as simple evidence of the world's increasing readiness to receive the Latter-day Saints Church.

In contrast, the "outsider" or secular scholarly opinion would explain Mormon landscape attitudes as a gradual evolution and diffusion of themes. These developed in the ancient Middle East, were reshaped in medieval Catholic Europe and in Reformation Britain, transferred to Puritan New England, and subsequently diffused throughout the northeastern United States. Historically, the secular view has not necessarily been less subjective than the two preceding. A goal of much of the secular literature on Mormons has been to discredit the legitimacy of the Church, and it is therefore suspected by many Mormon faithful.

Whichever viewpoint on Mormon intellectual traditions one adopts, the New England Puritan connection suggests an obvious transfer from Reformation Britain. Mormon and Puritan environmental beliefs were not identical, but some resemblances are striking. Peter Carroll examined the Puritan reaction to the New England wilderness.[59] He described a grant of land to John Winthrop and his heirs, which stipulated that they develop it. "The Court warned, however, that if 'att any time' these heirs 'suffer the said ileland to lye wast, and not improve the same, then this present demise [is] to be voide....'" In 1634 the General Court of Massachusetts Bay ordered "'that if any man hath any great quan[tity] of land... and doeth not builde upon it or im[prove it] within three yeares,' that the Court may 'disp[ense] of it to whome they please.'" The leaders of New England therefore based their policy of land distribution upon people's ability to develop resources, just as Mormons under Brigham Young redistributed unused farmland, timber, and water rights. Puritans also allocated agricultural holdings on the basis of family size, and believed that God, through nature, had provided them with all their needs. Puritans encouraged thrift, enacted conservation laws to protect scarce timber resources, and tried to establish a land tenure system of agricultural villages with communal grazing lands. They, too, perceived themselves as bound by a covenanted obligation to develop the wilderness and to create Zion in North America.[60]

Joseph Smith was born in Vermont of Massachusetts ancestry, and most of the first Mormons were also of New England stock. Preceding his founding of the Mormon Church, he intently examined a variety of Protestant denominations in a personal quest for the "true" religion. These facts suggest the likelihood of Joseph Smith's adoption of Puritan or other Protestant beliefs; in addition to widespread political, economic, and scientific ideas of his day.

Unfortunately, little detailed research has yet been published on

environmental beliefs of American religious denominations in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Topics needing further investigation are the currency of Puritan environmental beliefs and Protestant ministers' pronouncements about humanity's relation to nature during that period. Specific pathways of environmental ideas between denominations need to be examined, as well as the possibility that little direct transfer of ideas may have occurred, and that a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible explains basic similarities.

Significantly, research on links between early Mormon and contemporaneous Protestant doctrines on other issues suggests much similarity. For example, Hill defined early Mormon beliefs within the context of widespread American Christian "gospel primitivism."[61] Religious groups with this outlook accepted literal interpretations of the Bible, specifically with respect to millennial prophecies, and wished to restore the biblical Christian community and its unity.

Blanke described another American belief, widespread by 1820, that Americans' divinely ordained moral example would induce the second coming in North America.[62] He cited a Philadelphia minister's prediction in 1783:

> Zion shall here strengthen her cords and strengthen her stakes; and the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be gloriously exalted on high. . . . the outcasts of Israel . . . shall be restored; and with them the fulness of the gentile world shall flow to the standard of redeeming love.

These words not only foreshadow those of Mormon leader Orson Pratt in 1873 (*loc. cit.*, p. 6), but also those of the Mormon Tenth Article of Faith. The idea of Americans as the "holy nation", of course, itself descends from the Reformation English view of England as the chosen nation where the millennium would begin.

The scholarly tracing of environmental ideas, however, should not ignore an important aspect of the Mormons' own interpretation of their traditions. A basic tenet of humanistic geography and landscape perception studies is that what people *believe* to be true about an environment is what shapes their attitudes and actions regarding that environment. "Real truth", if different from believed truth, can be known only in hindsight, if at all. Early Utah Mormons created a definable landscape ethic out of their implicit belief in the divine origin of their church's teachings. They scarcely would have braved the hazards of pioneering the Great Basin to build God's Kingdom on earth had they held Mormon beliefs as intellectual hand-me-downs of denominations they discarded and disparaged.[63] Mormon beliefs had historical precedents of as yet uncertain lineage and diffusion pathways. That Mormons acted upon those beliefs, however, was an expression of their faith in the ahistorical independence of those ideals.

Nor should one overlook in the search for intellectual transfers the ways in which Mormons reinterpreted and juxtaposed ideas gleaned from various sources. As a denomination, they defined themselves not only as the biblical Israel, but also as Mormons and as Latter-day Saints. Brigham Young inherited the traditions of ancient Jewish prophecy and American presidency. Utah was simultaneously Zion, the Kingdom of God, and Deseret, so named by its provisional government in 1851. (In the *Book of Mormon*, [*Ether* 2:3] two brothers gather livestock, seeds, and *deseret* or honey bees to journey to the promised land, presaging Mormon immigration.)

The Mormon Kingdom was not a duplicated landscape, real or imagined, of

ancient Israel or Puritan Massachusetts in Utah, but was a selectively evolved, syncretistic creation. It emphasized Jewish prophecies to substantiate Christian doctrines. It incorporated American federal land allocation policies, including order and equality in land division, which themselves owe their visible landscape expression to ancient Mediterranean survey methods. Mormons elevated the medieval English system of agricultural villages with common lands to the status of biblical Christian communitarianism. They granted absolute authority over land use to a church hierarchy, while asserting the democratic ideal of equal access to resources. Insofar as Mormon pioneers mirrored European-derived environmental concepts, the mirror was indeed assembled from a variety of filters, lenses, reflections, and distortions.

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Abbreviations used in notes

BYU Brigham Young University.

D & C Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1823–1843). These are printed in many editions. The one used in this study was Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, Eds., *The doctrine and covenants containing revelations given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the prophet with an introduction and historical and exegetical notes* (Salt Lake City 1961).

JD *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool, England 1854–1886), 26 vols. These are collections of transcribed sermons and speeches of Church officials.

Notes

[1] This paper was presented at CUKANZUS '83: International Conference of Historical Geographers in Oxford, England, July, 1983. The conference theme was "Mirrors of the Old World: Europe and its reproduction overseas"

[2] Compare Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American mind* 3rd ed. (New Haven 1982) chs. 1–2; Peter Carroll, *Puritanism and the wilderness: The intellectual significance of the New England frontier* (New York 1969); John W. Reps, *Town planning in frontier America* (Princeton 1969) ch. 11; Maurice A. Mook and John A. Hostettler, The Amish and their land *Landscape* **6** (1957) 21–29

[3] Richard D. Poll, Thomas G. Alexander, Eugene E. Campbell and David E. Miller (eds), *Utah's history* (Provo 1978) 691. On the composition and character of Utah's population, see Helen Z. Papanikolas (ed.), *The peoples of Utah* (Salt Lake City 1976)

[4] Of the many books and articles on origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, some recent ones are: James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City 1976); Marvin S. Hill, The rise of the Mormon Kingdom of God, in Poll *et al., op. cit.* 97–112; and Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon experience: a history of the Latter-day Saints* (New York 1979)

[5] *D & C* Sec. 57: 1–6

[6] Compare *JD* 1: 107, 2: 141–143, 261–263, 16: 74; Melodie Moench, Nineteenth-century Mormons: the new Israel *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* **12** (1979) 42–56; Melodie Moench Charles, The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament *Sunstone* **5** (Nov.–Dec. 1980) 43–46; Gordon Irving, The Mormons and the Bible in the 1830's *BYU Studies* **13** (1973) 473–488

[7] The real Jews (typically called Judah rather than Israel) had a necessary but separate role in this scheme. God had not forgotten their ancient covenant, and they would need to return to Israel to precipitate the millennium when the "fullness of the gentiles" expired. *D & C* Sec. 54: 25, 109: 62–64, 133: 13, 35; Rudolph Glanz, *Jew and Mormon: historic group relations and religious outlook* (New York 1963) 51–55, 95–137

[8] cf *JD* 5: 371
[9] *JD* 2: 252–253, Steven L. Olsen, Zion: the structure of a theological revolution *Sunstone* **6** (Nov.–Dec. 1981) 21–26
[10] *JD* 16: 78–79. See also 200, 206–207, 252
[11] Mark P. Leone, *Roots of modern Mormonism* (Cambridge, Mass. 1979) 54–55
[12] *JD* 11: 165. See also *JD* 2: 265
[13] *JD* 16: 113. See also *JD* 5: 15, 16: 36, 62, 190
[14] *JD* 16: 67–68, 93–94, 103–105, 107
[15] *JD* 2: 280, 11: 103, 12: 235; James R. Clark (ed), *Messages of the first presidency of the First Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City 1965) 2: 204
[16] *JD* 1: 203. See also *JD* 5: 22
[17] *JD* 8: 282, 10: 222
[18] *JD* 2: 26, 9: 282, 10: 172, 13: 313
[19] *D & C* Sec. 88: 18–20; *JD* 5: 172; Leone, *op. cit.*, 71
[20] James E. Talmage, *A study of the Articles of Faith*, 49th English ed. (Salt Lake City 1968) 375–377; Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: economic history of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Lincoln, 1958) 25–26; *JD* 5: 112–113, 16: 323–324
[21] For a medieval European Christian precedent for the Mormon belief in restoring the earth to an Edenic state, see Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian shore: nature and culture in western thought from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century* (Berkeley 1967) 293–294; and J. Keith Melville, Brigham Young's ideal society: the Kingdom of God *BYU Studies* **5** (1962) 3–18
[22] *D & C* Sec. 29: 34–35
[23] Clark, *op. cit.* 2: 78
[24] Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: community and cooperation among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City 1976) 19. These authors and Arrington *op. cit.* discuss the functioning of specific Mormon cooperative ventures. *JD* 2: 105, 6: 96, and 7: 276 cite the New Testament source of this belief.
[25] Craig J. Brown, The allocation of timber resources within the Wasatch Mountains of Salt Lake County, Utah, 1847–1870 (unpubl. M.S. thesis, Univ. of Utah 1982); and Michael Scott Raber, Religious polity and local production: the origins of a Mormon town (unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, Yale Univ. 1978)
[26] *JD* 4: 29, 12: 35
[27] Compare Richard H. Jackson (ed), *The Mormon role in the settlement of the West* (Provo 1978); D. W. Meinig, The Mormon culture region: strategies and patterns in the geography of the American West, 1847–1964 *Annals, Association of American Geographers* **55** (1965) 191–220; *JD* 16: 207
[28] Richard H. Jackson, The Mormon village: genesis and antecedents of the City of Zion plan *BYU Studies* **17** (1977) 223–240; Richard H. Jackson and Robert L. Layton, The Mormon village: an analysis of a settlement type *Professional Geographer* **38** (1976) 136–141
[29] Clark, *op. cit.* 2: 350–351, 357–359
[30] *JD* 2: 145, 10: 172, 12: 201
[31] *JD* 2: 118–124, 12: 203, 16: 22–23
[32] Arrington, *op. cit.* 54, 92; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Utah* (San Francisco 1889) 285
[33] Joseph Smith urged Mormons to purchase land in the Missouri "center stake" of Zion: *D & C* Sec. 57: 4–6, 63: 25–31, 101: 69–74
[34] Lawrence L. Linford, Establishing and maintaining land ownership in Utah prior to 1869 *Utah Historical Quarterly* **42** (1974) 127–143
[35] This land allocation principle thus reinforced the practice of polygamy.
[36] Brown, *op. cit.*; Leonard J. Arrington and Dean May, A different mode of life: irrigation and society in nineteenth century Utah *Agricultural History* **49** (1975) 3–20; Raber, *op. cit.*
[37] Arrington, *op. cit.* 25; Arrington, Fox and May, *op. cit.* 15–40; A. Don Sorenson, Being equal in earthly and heavenly power: the idea of stewardship in the united order *BYU Studies* **18** (1977) 100–117
[38] Arrington, *op. cit.* 28; *JD* 2: 98–100
[39] Arrington, Fox and May, *op. cit.*; *JD* 2: 300, 14: 88, 16: 60
[40] Brown, *op. cit.* 50–55. For examples of land conveyances based on this principle, see Minute Books A and B, Minutes of the Salt Lake County Court, Utah State Archives (Salt Lake City 1852–1874)
[41] Clark, *op. cit.* 2: 261–264; Arrington, *op. cit.* 26; Poll *et al.*, *op. cit.* 201–203

[42] Arrington, *op. cit.* 26
[43] William W. Speth, Environment, culture, and the Mormon in early Utah: a study in cultural adaptation *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* **29** (1967) 53–67
[44] Clark, *op. cit.* 2: 188–189. See also *JD* 5: 17
[45] Compare Frederick Turner, *Beyond geography: the western spirit against the wilderness* (New York 1980); Wallace Stegner, Land: America's history teacher *The Living Wilderness* **45** (Summer 1981) 5–13
[46] For an overview of the debate, see Robin Doughty, Environmental theology: trends and prospects in Christian thought, *Progress in Human Geography* **7** (1981) 133–140
[47] Strong cases for early Mormon and Judeo-Christian conservation principles are in Hugh W. Nibley, Brigham Young on the environment, in Truman G. Madsen and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (eds), *To the glory of God: Mormon essays on great issues* (Salt Lake City 1972) 3–29; and Hugh W. Nibley, Subduing the earth, in Hugh W. Nibley (ed), Nibley on the timely and the timeless: classic essays of Hugh W. Nibley 1 in the *Religious Studies Monograph Series* (Provo 1978) 85–100
[48] The antipathy which pioneers are supposed to have felt for the wilderness as also belied by their fondness for picknicking and camping in the mountains (*JD* 2: 283–284, 5–56)
[49] *JD* 5: 335. See also *JD* 1: 92, 349, 2: 91, 5: 54, 16: 165
[50] *JD* 11: 149. See also *D & C* Sec. 49: 21 and 89: 11–15. However, the description in Clark, *op. cit.* 2: 353, of an enormous "varmint" hunt suggests that some wildlife resources were not appreciated, as they were not elsewhere in the U.S. at that time.
[51] Brown, *op. cit.*; Clark, *op. cit.* 2: 70
[52] *JD* 5: 24, 344–345
[53] *JD* 12: 236–237
[54] Richard H. Jackson, Utah's harsh lands, hearth of greatness *Utah Historical Quarterly* **49** (1981) 4–25
[55] *JD* 11: 149–150. The character of Utah's vegetation before 1847 and subsequent environmental deterioration are matters of debate among ecologists. For favorable early evaluations of Salt Lake Valley grasslands, see Richard H. Jackson, Mormon perception and settlement *Annals Association of American Geographers* **68** (1978) 317–334. Jackson argued that retrospective accounts of the Salt Lake Valley as a desert in 1847 furthered the Church's colonization policy for truly arid lands. This paper would also argue for rapid deterioration of rangelands around Salt Lake City and for the Mormon's adoption of the desert improvement imagery of the Pentateuch (*loc. cit.* 5) as explanations for the "desertification" of early Utah in Mormon historiography.
[56] John Wesley Powell, *Report on the lands of the arid region of the United States,* 1879 ed. (Cambridge, Mass. 1962) 121, 155–156
[57] Yi-Fu Tuan, Our treatment of the environment in ideal and actuality *American Scientist* **58** (1970) 244–249; Dan L. Flores, Zion in Eden: phases of the environmental history of Utah *Environmental Review* **7** (1983) 325–344
[58] On the problems of objectively interpreting Mormon history and beliefs, see Jan Shipps, The Mormon past: revealed or revisited? *Sunstone* **6** (Nov.–Dec. 1981) 55–57; David Earl Bohn, No higher ground *Sunstone* **8** (May–June 1983) 26–32
[59] Carroll, *op. cit.* 183–190. However, the Mormon and Puritan churches differed on many other theological issues. See Mario S. DePillis, The quest for religious authority and the rise of Mormonism *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* **1** (1966) 68–88
[60] Daniel H. Wells's favorable comparison of Mormon and Puritan activities shows Mormon knowledge of their New England roots (*JD* 2: 28)
[61] Marvin S. Hill, The shaping of the Mormon mind in New England and New York *BYU Studies* **9** (1969) 351–372
[62] Gustave H. Blanke with Karen Lynn, 'God's base of operations': Mormon variation on the American sense of mission *BYU Studies* **20** (1979) 83–92
[63] *JD* 16: 206–207. See also the opening chapter of the Book of Mormon regarding Mormon views of antecedent Christian denominations.